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ABSTRACT

This study determined the practices of secondary teachers in classroom situations related to gender equity. Researchers investigated: 1) whether teacher behaviors perpetuated sex stereotypes; 2) whether teachers gave more attention to either gender; 3) levels of student participation; 4) opportunities for student participation; and 5) gender equity in instructional materials. The researchers worked in five rural Missouri high schools, using cluster sampling in two classrooms in each school. Surveys of students and teachers included 13 questions on gender equity and attitudes. Researchers also used two observation instruments (one on teacher behavior and interaction and the other on embedded discrimination). Results indicated that: student-teacher interactions were perpetuating gender stereotypes; teachers gave more attention to male students; male students received more of the higher-thinking-skills questions; male students interacted more with teachers (though students perceived that both genders interacted equally); male students received more opportunities for participation in the classroom; and instructional materials were gender equal. The paper offers five recommendations for remedying this unequal situation. (Contains 21 references.) (SM)

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Gender Equity in Rural Secondary Classrooms

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INTRODUCTION

For the past several years, the emphasis on education has changed from producing like citizens for a democratic society to producing individuals with separate and unique strengths. The emphasis on individuality is especially apparent with the increased consideration on gender equity. However, although the emphasis has been on attaining gender equity in classrooms and subject areas, research shows there are still wide gaps in gender equity in classrooms in the secondary schools. This situation is made even more difficult to remedy because the educational establishment is doing battle with the status quo of society as a whole. According to Jose A. Cardenas (1994),

> The difficulty in establishing gender equity in schools is further compounded by a lower value, or even negative value, given women in the larger society. Regardless of the shortcomings of the school, we must admit that the attitudes and prejudices of the school simply reflect the attitudes and prejudices of the larger society. (p.4)

In order for the students of today to be ready for the twenty-first century, all students must be given equal educational opportunities. This means gender equity must become the norm in classrooms rather than the exception. Attitudes and actions of the classroom teachers are reflected not only in classroom behaviors but in selected textbooks, supplementary materials including videos, posters, tapes, etc., and even in the assignments given. Part of the responsibility for teachers' actions and attitudes must be assumed by the educational institutions which prepare them for their classroom duties. It is crucial for

teachers to be not only informed about appropriate strategies for insuring gender equity in the classroom, but that they be using those strategies on a regular, daily basis.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Teachers play the crucial part in education in providing gender equity in classroom experiences They are often dealing with their own preconceived notions as well as those preconceived notions coming from home environments regarding male and female roles, and it may be their responsibility to circumvent those archaic notions by proper educational procedures. These procedures include everything from selection of materials to be used in the classrooms to the choice of posters and motivational information placed on the walls to numbers of time teachers actually interact either negatively or positively with male and female students. The purpose of this descriptive study was to determine the practices of secondary teachers in classroom situations in regard to gender equity.

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Much concern has been expressed for the state of education in this country today. National reports give gloom and doom forecasts of the future of the youth, thus, the future of the country. At a time when all resources are needed to insure the forward progress of this country, research shows that one faction of the population is not receiving the same quality of public education and may not even be receiving the same quantity of education. According to a study commissioned by the American Association of University Women (1992),

> Girls are being steered away from the very courses required for their productive participation in the future of America, and we as a nation are losing m ore than one half of our human potential. By the turn of the century, two out of three new

> entrants into the workforce will be women and minorities. This work force will have fewer and fewer decently paid openings for the unskilled. It will require strength in science, mathematics, and technology - subjects girls are still being told are not suitable for them. (p.7)

Because of the importance of education in providing the young people of this country with the proper background to become productive and contributing citizens, it is necessary to examine the practices of the secondary teachers currently teaching in the classrooms. These practices need to be examined especially for gender equity. These practices would include not only direct interactions between teacher and student but materials, classroom settings, and general classroom language as well. Cardenas (1994) wrote,

> Bringing change to our schools in order to provide for the equitable treatment of students of both genders will be slow in developing unless a comprehensive program is systemically adopted. Such a program must be based on a new and different perception of women's roles in modern educational societal paradigms. (p.16).

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

This will be a descriptive study of these teacher procedures using observations and interviews as well as surveys. Following are the questions to be addressed:

1. What are the specific teacher behaviors in the classroom including the following:
    A. Are gender stereotypes perpetuated by the kinds of teacher responses given?
    B. Do teachers give more attention, negative or positive or both, to one gender?

C. Do teacher expectations obviously differ because of student gender?

2. What are the levels of student participation in classrooms?

3. Do male and female students receive equal opportunities for participation?

4. Do instructional materials used daily in the classrooms adhere to guidelines for gender equity?

For population and sampling techniques, the researcher selected five high schools in South Central Missouri and used cluster sampling in two classrooms in each of these five high schools.

Surveys were made up of 13 questions and were answered by the students in a particular classroom and the teacher in that classroom. One classroom had two teachers in the classroom because of the number of IEP students. Students and teachers were identified as to gender. The 11 teachers surveyed, observed, and interviewed were seven females and four males. A total of 171 students from five different high schools were surveyed and observed. The gender make-up of the students were 90 females and 81 males. A sampling of these students were interviewed.

Along with the survey instruments used, two observation instruments were used for data collection. One instrument dealt with Teacher Interaction, Higher Thinking Skills Questions, Gender Reinforcement, Gender Role Stereotyping, and Gender Domination. Using this instrument, the researcher did frequency counts in regard to all of the above indicated categories. In the Teacher Interaction category, frequency counts included positive and negative male and female Teacher Interactions.

The other observation instrument dealt with the Imbedded Discrimination in the classrooms. The categories included Language, Historical Records, Texts-Instructional Materials, and Visual Displays. It should be noted that most of the texts were a recent copyright and were not gender biased. Also, the motivational and instructional posters and examples on the classroom walls included few references to gender.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SUMMARY

For years, society has guaranteed male and female students the right to equal space in equal classrooms. However, society can not guarantee male and female students will receive the same quality or even quantity of educational opportunities. Providing appropriate educational opportunities for the students of today requires teachers to be aware of the many happenings in their classrooms. The ideal situation would be one in which every individual regardless of gender or any other differences would receive the same and optimum opportunities for learning. However, teachers are human with human weaknesses and frailties which include preconceived ideas as well as societal influences. Unfortunately, this often means female students will not have the same quality or quantity of educational opportunities as the male students in the same classrooms.

This situation is not the result of teachers making calculated choices about the students in their classrooms. Rather, it is the result of ongoing happenings from preschool days on through secondary education. Male and female students learn early not only the physical differences but the societal differences as well. In some instances, the females are not considered to have as much value as the males. Some subjects in school are also considered to have more value than others. In this day of technology, math and science are considered very valuable disciplines in the school setting. Math and science

have been the two areas in the past where there has been great concern about the achievements of female students. These two subjects have now been joined by a third - computers. Computers are seen as male friendly, and this can discourage female students from exploring this new domain.

Although texts and instructional materials used in the classrooms are gender equal and do not promote one gender more than another, the actual teacher/student interactions are overwhelmingly male dominated even though that is not the perception of the students or the teachers. Teachers think they give fairly equal time to both genders. As one of the teachers interviewed said, "I never go to one gender more than the other. I just respond to those who ask for me." Ironically, because of societal roles and environment, that is usually the male student.

By using survey instruments for students and teachers as well as observation instruments, it was possible to obtain opinions of those while doing actual frequency counts of occurrences in the various classrooms. From these frequency counts, the researcher was able to corroborate the research information in the literature reviewed regarding differences in quality and quantity of educational opportunities for male and female students. Although this study was within a particular area of the state and concerning five high schools and ten classrooms, it is possible to draw conclusions from this study.

CONCLUSIONS

Because of the date collected through surveys, observations, and interviews and presented in this paper, the following conclusions are offered:

1. Gender stereotypes were being perpetuated by the numbers and kinds of student/teacher interactions occurring in the classrooms. While the language used in the classrooms was not gender specific for just one gender, the fact that male students received more attention from the teachers continues to perpetuate the stereotype that males have more worth than females.
2. Teachers gave more attention to male students in the classroom than to female students in the same classroom. While the attention from student/teacher interactions was usually more positive than negative, some negative attention was given.
3. Some evidence of difference in teacher expectations based on gender was evident because of the higher percentage of higher thinking skills questions being given to male students. The ironic part of this may be that male students are given more questions and more opportunities to answer because the teacher did not trust the answer given by the male student as much as the answer given by the female student.
4. While students perceived that both genders were equally vocal in classroom settings, the fact that male students were interacting more with the teachers gave a higher level of male participation in the classroom settings. The researcher observed more visible and vocal female participation in classrooms where the female students greatly outnumbered the male students.
5. Male students received more opportunities for participation in the classrooms because there was significantly more male student/teacher interaction than

female student/teacher interaction in the classrooms. Male students in the classroom tended to demand more interaction and attention from the teachers, and the teachers responded accordingly. All subject areas are not open equally to both females and males. The old myths of math and science and the new myth of computers exclude females from opportunities to learn.

6. While the instructional materials and texts observed in the classrooms were gender equal, this was because the particular books observed had current copyright dates. Students do need to see contributions made by both genders treated equally in traditional classroom subject areas including math and science.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of the conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Teachers, counselors, and administrators must bring gender equity and awareness to aspects of education. Classroom teachers must be made aware of the gross examples of gender inequity and make concerted efforts to include both male and female students in all aspects of education. Everything from visuals in the classrooms to texts and instructional materials must be consciously considered for gender equity.
2. Educational reform must take place in the education of the educators. Higher learning institutions must make their students aware of the issue of gender equity in the classroom and make a concerted effort to change the status quo.

For teachers already in the teaching arena, in-service programs concerning gender equity in language, teacher interactions, curriculums, and all other areas of learning must be conducted to insure rapid changes. Taping actual teaching in the classrooms setting to reveal the differences in interactions between teachers and male and female students could be one way to quickly bring recognition to one aspect of the problem.

3. Changes must be made in the current, traditional school curriculum to include the achievements and contributions of both males and females. It is crucial to gender equity that both male and female students see themselves positively in the materials they study.
4. To insure the awareness of all subject areas to both males and females, equal access and encouragement must be given to both genders. The old myths must be refuted with new experiences and positive role models for both males and females.
5. Both males and females must be given the opportunities to choose the types of careers and vocations suitable to their abilities, talents, and desires. Giving students the necessary attributes for making educated choices in all areas for both genders should be the ultimate goal of educational institutions.

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